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Emerging Technology: Instant Gratification

While users embrace Instant Messaging, network managers should give it a more cautious welcome.

by Andy Dornan

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You're working on an important project and need to bounce ideas off colleagues in another office. Do you phone each one in turn? Do you send out a group e-mail, filling everybody's inbox with long replies? Many people will do neither. Thanks to Instant Messaging (IM), they can send electronic post-it notes to whole groups at once and receive replies in real time.

Once a forum for cybersex and inane chat, IM has become a serious business. Forty-six percent of all Fortune 1000 companies plan to implement it by the end of 2001, according to analyst firm Forrester Research (www.forrester.com). Network Magazine readers are ahead of the pack, with more than half of the network managers who responded to our most recent Web survey (see The Pulse) already using one of the free systems. It's easy to see why: The technology has the immediacy of the telephone, the cost savings of e-mail, and a potential for collaboration second only to real human contact.

It also has some severe problems to overcome. The voice, video, and file-transfer features now being added to previously text-only software make IM more personal, but these features quickly swallow up network bandwidth. Also, constant contact itself is not always a benefit, as anyone plagued by telesales and spam will testify. Worst of all, from a serious user's point of view, the market is effectively owned by AOL, the king of the consumer network. Its system is proprietary, free, and

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aimed squarely at casual surfers. While thousands of businesses use the software, that doesn't make it business-class.

All this means corporate IT strategists have some tough decisions to make. Should you encourage IM or try to ban it? If you permit it in your enterprise, do you choose one of the publicly available services or install your own private system? Telling your users to sign up with ICQ is cheap and simple, but setting up a dedicated server running Lotus' (www.lotus.com) SameTime gives you control. There are also privacy issues associated with IM that network managers should be aware of.

Finally, think about where the Internet is headed. Many analysts believe that IM is a transient technology, already evolving toward more advanced teamwork tools. Vendors agree, and many have released products that integrate with e-mail, groupware, or wireless data services.

MESSAGING MESS

The IM industry is the ground for a bitter battle, as AOL tries to protect its dominant position. Already the market leader with the AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) system, the company has entrenched its position by acquiring former rivals Mirabilis and Tegic. Mirabilis pioneered the technology ICQ ("I seek you"), the most popular system outside the United States. Tegic offers wireless messaging that interfaces with both AIM and ICQ, and it licenses text-input software to every mobile phone manufacturer.

Against this titan, even the mighty Microsoft has given up. Its Microsoft Network (MSN) Messenger tried to interface with AIM in 1999, but was quickly blocked by AOL's programmers. The same goes for the Yahoo! Messenger. Only plucky start-ups Tribal Voice (www.tribalvoice.com) and Odigo (www.odigo.com) maintain compatibility with AOL, and this is just by a game of cat and mouse: Whenever AOL shuts them out, their programmers try to find a way back in.

The result is that few systems are interoperable; to communicate, you need to use the same IM system as all of your friends or colleagues, or else install them all. There are exceptions. The part of the industry not owned by AOL is beginning to work together. Meanwhile, users of AIM and ICQ can both exchange messages with the Tegic wireless system, but bizarrely not with each other (see figure).

In an effort to bring some order to the IM chaos, the IETF is developing an open standard called Instant Messaging and Presence Protocol (IMPP). The IMPP working group has already published two RFCs and expects a full draft by early 2001.

If AOL can't achieve compatibility between the two systems that it owns, doing so with rivals seems a distant hope. The Federal Trade Commission doesn't agree. In June 2000, it announced an investigation into AOL's market dominance. The government may even order both systems to open up as a condition of AOL's plan to take over Time Warner.

Within two days of this announcement, AOL attempted to placate the commission by filing a submission to the IETF. However, it still says that rivals connecting to its network are "hacking," and that it will continue to block them. This is necessary, the company claims, to protect users from "a barrage of offensive spam, attempts to defraud, and virus proliferation."

If that sounds familiar, it's because AOL once used exactly the same argument about the Internet itself. Surfers, it claimed, would be safer if they remained within the boundaries of a closed online service.

MORE THAN MAIL

Interoperability might not be a high priority if you only need IM for intercompany use. You can standardize on any service, and choosing one without many users may even have advantages: It protects your organization from spam, and it reduces the likelihood of the system being abused.

For all the talk about IM being a mission-critical application, chat is still its main use. As one (anonymous) respondent to our survey put it, "It's more private than making a phone call and actually can make you 'sound' busy."

If you do decide to go with one of the free services, it's worth the time to examine and perhaps try each one in turn. They are not all the same (see Table 1). Each one has slightly different features and often an idiosyncratic user interface. All permit freeform text, while most also have separate bulletin boards for threaded discussions. ICQ even enables users to chat about any Web page, automatically linking to other surfers who happen to be visiting it at the same time. If you run a highly trafficked site, it can be interesting to log on and read what people have to say about your efforts.

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